

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART SERIES



VENKATAPPA

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

LALIT KALĀ SERIES
OF
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

This series dealing with the work of modern Indian artists endeavours to bring to the public at low cost the art of our own times. Each pocket-book contains an introduction, reproductions in colour and black and white and a short biographical note.



K. VENKATAPPA

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

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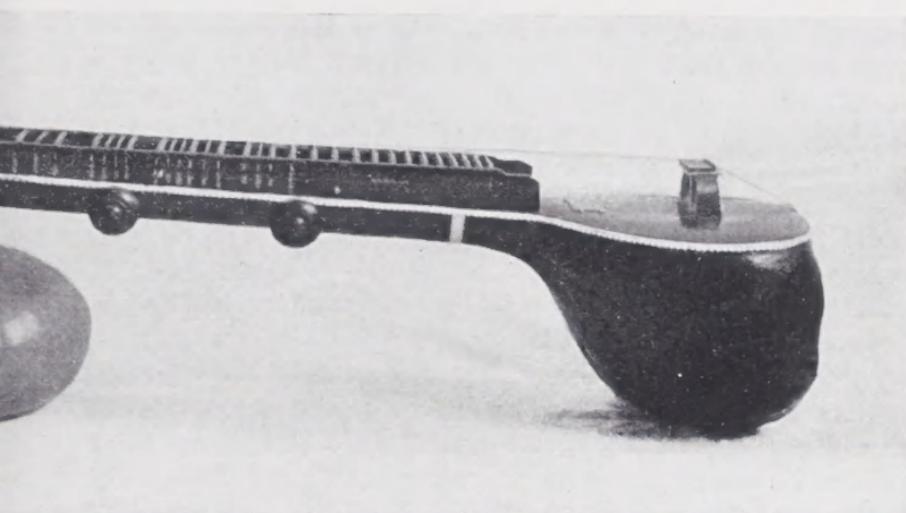
VENKATAPPA

Anyone who met Venkatappa would be struck with his bearing and with the neatness and thoroughness with which he did everything. Firm, sure and confident he was dedicated to his art. Dr. Abanindranath Tagore, his master, seems to have once said that to an artist his art is father, mother and God — his all. To this maxim Venkatappa remained true.

Venkatappa came of a Chitragarla family, which worked in a traditional style using gold leaf. He developed independence of vision and design in the fastnesses of his soul building on what he had learned as a student in Mysore and Calcutta and while studying the early Schools of Indian and other Arts. With Nandalal and others he helped to copy the Ajanta frescoes for Lady Herringham. His love of colour and light in nature was deep and sensitive; for it derived from the wealth of flora and fauna in the various parts of India and crowned with his experience of the majesty of the snow-clad Himalayas. He remained true to his country's traditions and culture — the best of which he loved and vowed to serve. He would not be anybody's servant or be burdened with any exercise of authority. All the idealism of the Revival Movement was in him and his pride as a Karnataka artist was considerable. Even Nandalal toyed with modernist modes. With Gaganendranath Tagore Venkatappa did a few views of the Himalayas from Darjeeling; but would not strive the Cubist or any other modernist way.

By about 1920, when he settled in Mysore with a studio of his own, he had sold many of his works on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata themes. His studies of human figures like those of Pratapa Simha, Shankaracharya, the Buddha with disciples, Mahashivaratri, "Damayanti", "Tippoo Sultan", a Persian Lady at her Toilet, are idealistic. Two works of marvellous felicity, Ardhanariswara and the Bengal Floriken won esteem and admiration at exhibitions in India and elsewhere. He seems to have tried the oil medium as well; and we have one black and white study in crayon: a figure of Sardar Gopala Raj Urs. There are two views of Mysore from the Chamundi Hills good in their kind: but they cannot compare with his later Ooty and Kodai landscapes. The Bengal Floriken (1910) is the perfect realisation of a bird-figure which is better than any in the old Persian, Mughal or the Pahari Schools. It won for him the encomium of W. Rothenstein who said Venkatappa 'deserved to be the head of any 'school of art.' The Ardhanariswara done with brush has sharp if soft haunting beauty of line and tone, subtlety and exquisiteness which realises this particular God-image in a way no stone carving or painting did before. There is nothing violent in Venkatappa's compositions: like his own life all is ordered, organised, held in control and achieves effect through discipline. This quality and his type of subject (eg.: he did not attempt Durga) is denigrated today and some would relegate it to mere craftsmanship, a term which he resented. When vision and design match, it can be art either way; they fulfil themselves both ways. Centuries of preference in all climes illustrate this point. Some prefer the adventurous kind; some the sober: a point of personal preference. Aesthetically and artistically both are legitimate. 'When I can give you more of more, why must you constrain me to do less?' he would say. Once he took a fine brush and in





four or five lines drew a figure of perfect vitality and strength; then took a thicker brush and daubed inside the lines with paint. The heavy strokes made the whole thing fierce and devilishly cunning; then he threw the brushes away. This is not worth doing and living for, he said. His preference was for the great and the grand, the beautiful and the clean, of this country. To present imaginatively, not reproduce or represent or symbolise was his desire. A wealth of skill, training, insight worked for it. Each spoke the theme, enshrining it; human, large and inspiring. There was nothing shoddy or impatient; no flourish, nor quick excitement; no bursts of ecstasy or anguish; no throw-up of sub-conscious dirt or wilfulness; and no fury of stroke; nor any mere ebullition of 'free, private fancy' in his work. Terms like Beauty, Harmony, Balance, Finish or Finesse, the round and smooth, Grace and Idealism, not in esteem for sometime now, are unluckily his; which have led perhaps to neglect of his work. Some people built up a legend that he was unsociable and difficult. His strictness for good form in behaviour hurt a few. But there was no more amiable or simpler man than he if approached as friend. He then opened out; sent word when a

picture was completed; announced shows of his work; threw them open to the public; took visitors round explaining things. All letters he replied promptly. Nor men, nor institutions nor the highest in power would be spared if he felt that they hurt his dignity as an artist or true Art. He kept them out and took them to Courts of Law and got amends made. No one could take him for granted, exploit him or his work or misrepresent it. His unwillingness to suffer fools gladly cost him dear. His was really a loveable character and he liked to be liked and understood, and he deserved to be honoured. From early on he kept out of the limelight. When the Akademi chose to honour him it was rather late and he had been ill for sometime. But the gathering of artists and art critics at his place warmed his heart.

To the landscapes he came more particularly in the later '20s and in the '30s: the last picture in that genre he did in 1957. The Ooty and Kodai pictures are a feast of colour. He did not copy nor see with a 'camera-eye': no; but worked in his studio: occasionally checking up the lie of the land or the conjuncture of things to pattern the sights, lights, colours and dimensions and the related volumes his way. Level on level of land, mountain scene; tree, foliage, flowers; water, sky and cloudline; night, morning, moonrise; the full moon, the crystal lake and its reflections, the glens and their vistas of vision; the hide and seek of endless interior spaces; the contrast of hard and soft as of moss on stone on the Elk Hill path; the austerity of a hill-slope sparse-clad with bright bits of colour and its veil under the rain; the storm; the cylindrical, plank-like, cone-like or thin shafts of light illuminating mists, or, in twilight; the onset of the monsoon; the majesty of the midnight hill with hut, a speck or two of house-lights somewhere in its bosom or with clusters of stars if one saw more carefully — now many of them! How many blues and greens, how various the landscapes: the eucalyptus, fir and pine, the forking paths, the plywood wainscot shadows on road and lawns, hill and valley; bits of sky peeping from everywhere marking off planes; the resistance of the sharp rock-silhouette of the mountain range

in moon rise; the enchantment of the full moon with cloud embellishments on top while the live shapeliness of a tall plant training an ornamental frame on its left and to the right, one long bough luxuriously enjoying itself against a rich tree-laden hill-line to further left below. **Sanmanushya Mano Yatha** is the **Nirmalam Sphatikodakam** of the Ooty Lake with its grass, trees and masses of lawn and tree groups, light and shade reflected gloriously in it.

His last work is symbolic and almost a premonition of his own sunset; it shows a sombre blood-red glowing orb as it saturates the wavy hill-lines lighting up the dark, green and greyish fur or velvet. Except in one work, the human figure never disturbs nature. And curiously no birds either. The solitude of the woodland and the riot of colour with flowers or leaf line or moss is marked for individuality. This is opulence. Pure Landscape is rare in India; it is a Western preference. Possibly Ruskin in whose work he was interested made him try his hand at it, for not even in the largest landscape in Kishangarh Painting is it primary; landscape is there as setting for lovers or a gay or royal gathering or for Krishna, Radha and the Gopis.

Ivory Miniature painting is also rare today. It is difficult to do but his "Abanindranath", two portraits of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and two of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV of Mysore are masterpieces in their kind. The Cooch Behar item is lost like the older Ardhanariswara picture. S. V. Ramaswamy Mudaliar seems to have commissioned an ivory miniature of himself and G. Venkatachalam says: it is the largest of its kind he made. It is a pity they are not available to lovers of art. Each is finished with a different scheme of colours and the study of the figures is sensitive and full of regard for character and personality; and each shows his supreme technical mastery.

A technical note on Tempera Painting won for him a prize in 1913. In it he expounds its special features.

He made his own pigments and brushes. The purity and limpidity which he achieved and the brightness of his blues, ochres,

greens and yellows are specially due to this. Earlier he used white paint for the flower as in the "Floriken." Later he isolated the blank of the board space for the sharp white of a star or flower.

Sculpture in plaster is another medium in which Venkatappa distinguished himself. We have three notable portrait busts: one that of a boy, "Mani", who served him in a hotel in Mysore, innocent, trustful and loyal; second that of "Veena Seshanna", his teacher and a master-musician on the Veena — whose courtly features make a magnificent study. Face, turban, brow, moustache, chin, the coat and **Uttariyam** on it — with its brocade border design—endow the figure and the features with character and power.

The "Portrait of Tagore" has been acquired for the Rabindra Bhavan at Bangalore. The original had the full prophetic expression of the great poet and the spreading beard matched it in exuberance, the moustache falling from above his open and speaking lips. The beard now is trimmed to fairer form and casts an elegant shadow from many angles and divides the handsome neck and shoulder making it beautiful with the edge or the garment worn daintily on it. It is now coloured softer and shows lighter.

The most distinguished pieces of sculpture, modelled and carved are his bas-reliefs made for the 108 ft. Amba Vilas Hall in the Mysore Palace at the request of the late Maharaja of Mysore. There are seven principal reliefs which can be studied in the light and position for which they were designed. The themes are "The Great Renunciation," "Buddha the Mendicant", "Rama handing the Signet Ring to Hanuman", "Drona teaching Archery to the Pandavas", "Ekalavya practising Archery"; the "Dance of Shiva," and the "Parting of Shakuntala." In none is the human form strained or distorted for mere emotional expression or artistic effect; the compositions are all largely human, with a strength, grace and dignity which he liked our national figures to be presented with; they breathe a spacious air and are anatomically perfect and aesthetically satisfying.

The shaping of each figure in relative position and stance; the balance of the total composition, the distinctness in personality — and function; the groupings in space as between the main and subordinate items; the planes showing up levels and positions; the full articulation of the central event as in the Giving of the Ring by Rama or in the Blessing by Kanva; the weight of a high-strung body in full absorption and flourish of a Tandava; Coiffure, texture and fold of the Sari worn the Karnataka way by Shakuntala; light and shade, curvature, flexion of a muscle, a hand, a face, an eye; all right as structure and artistic iconography; and much, much else—are technical elements in this artist's rich creativity. Each detail speaks and does its part in a total harmony which in relief is not over $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch high. Venkatappa was as fine a student of music as he was of Painting and Sculpture. While at Calcutta he met Srirangam Ramaswamy Iyengar, a pupil of Seshanna, who initiated him to the Veena. By 1917 Venkatappa returned to Mysore and soon won the affection of the master himself. Seshanna invited him to every performance in his house and his silent figure could be seen seated almost in the same place every time a great local musician or a visiting master gave a recital. His absorption in the Veena was like his absorption in Painting—total: this period lasted ten years.

It is when he was totally absorbed in Veena that he painted his famous "Mad after Veena"—probably the only auto-biographical piece of work of his in painting. When Abanindranath asked him what new work he had been doing he seems to have done this picture in answer, describing his condition as "Gone on Music". There he is in dishabille stretched pitifully on the ground begging the grace of the Deity of the Veena to vouchsafe to him her blessing. All else to him is blank. Behind are left the veiled sculpted figure of his Master on the shelf. Personifications of painting and sculpture are tied up to a tall pillar and droop in neglect; while below are thrown about rolls of painting through which rats play; the paint box and brushes are dry and scattered. The full figure of the artist is a speaking volume of shape with no line bounding the body.

It is most expressive of a dramatic situation.

For days he would play one Raga or Tala; or study effects of the one on the other as much to enjoy the music of the Karnataka tradition as to sound possibilities. If our Raga system defines and individuates to perfection some one succession of notes in rise and fall, it **ipso facto** binds it to within a range of natal effects, nuances and pitch relations; at once its strength and limitation. He experimented with their subtleties of tone and expression. For comparative resonance he got made a Raja Veena, which only a master like him could play on. For hours on end and for days together he would play on ragas without repeating a phrase or bar. When one was lucky to hear him it seemed a **Tapasya** or **Siddhi** in expression. The melody with all its purity, natal values and reach and range of effect, the **Vareks** and nuances of tone, lilts and flow of soul would be his gift and nectar to the listening ear. He would not play even at the bidding of his master; certainly not for the public; it was not easy of access to any body. He simply said he was not ripe for that. He ever said he was not even an artist; only a 'student of art'. That was no put-on humility but illustrative of his passion for perfection. His mastery of the instrument was consummate.

Early in this century there was a controversy on the number of **Srutis** in (Indian) music. Musicologists from East and West joined in. Venkatappa produced a **Sruti-Veena** to establish that the number was 22 and he marked out on it in lovely Devanagari script the names of each. Whatever the truth be about the number it establishes for us the person who worked at a problem like he did.

Abanindranath wrote a short note on **Chitra Shadanga** in Bengali which was printed in "Prabasi". The Principles of measurement in art were enunciated there; the divine and human forms were illustrated. The **Uttama Navatala Pramana**, the **Sama Bhangi** and the **Tribhangi** etc., are all marked for measure and model and are commented on. It is first class aid to a student. It was later printed in an English translation in the "Modern Review" and came out in book form as "Notes on

Indian Artistic Anatomy." Venkatappa and Nandalal Bose illustrated the text. One can see how beautifully, parallels between the animal, bird, fish or plant features have been sensed and worked by the first seers in art or poetry. Lotus flower, til sheaf, plantain stalk, the bimba fruit, elephant trunk; conch, crab and egg; oxhead, rattle, eagle, tender shoot, neem leaf etc. were forms used as a base for shaping the features and limbs of the human body. Before a convention is formed and set, one sees how close observation of nature discovers the exemplars. Here is the set which for beauty and expressiveness of face, brows, eyes, mouth, lips, ears, chin, shoulders, arm, hand, wrist, legs, knee-cap and foot have served as models drawn from nature. The drawings themselves are artefacts and show how firmly and finally, yet how sensitively and vitally, Venkatappa was able to bring them off.

In all that he was and did his was a strength and a chaste dignity and—integral expression.

V. Sitaramiah

The co-operation of Sri K. Rama Raju of Bangalore in the production of this monograph is gratefully acknowledged.





























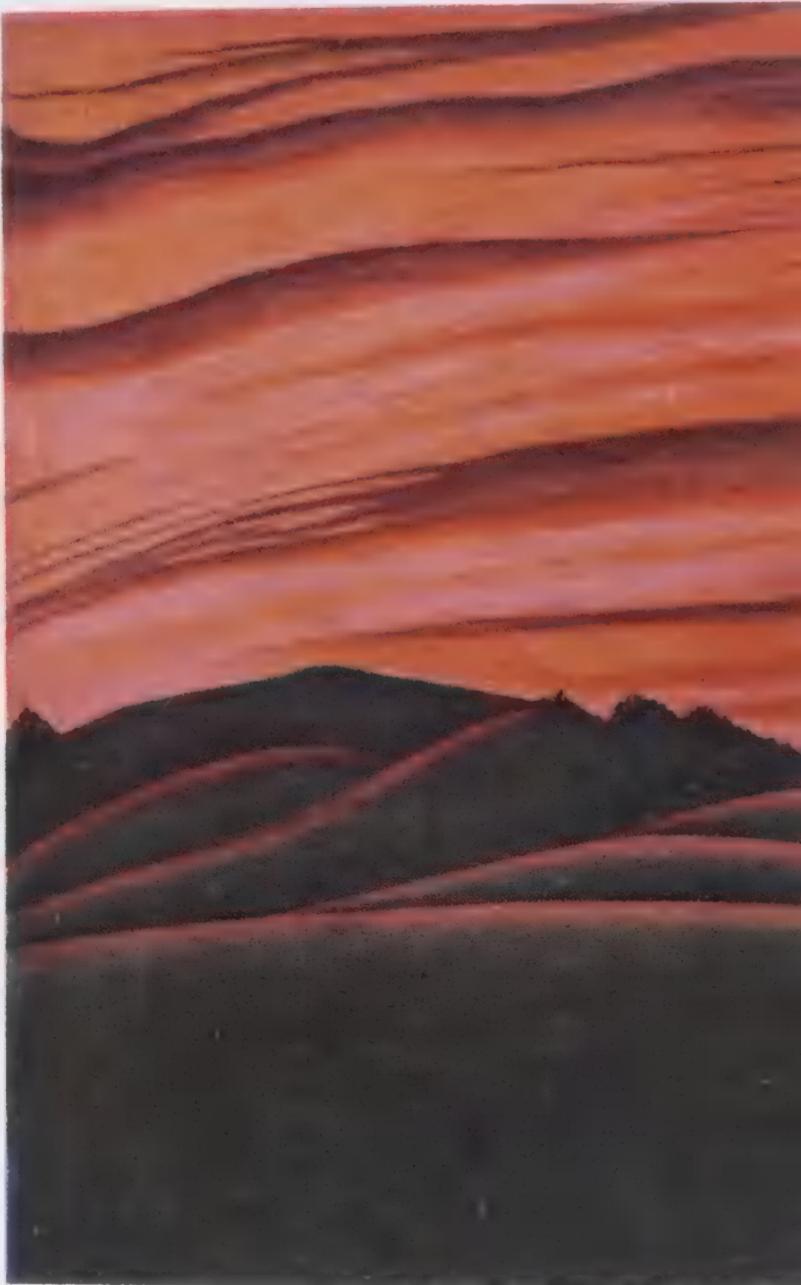
















VENKATAPPA—LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

No.	Title	Medium	Size	Year	Collection
1	Setubandha	W. Colour		1912	Indian Museum, Calcutta
2	Bearshola Hills and Bryant's Park, Kodaikanal	W. Colour	25.5x18 cm.	1934	K. Rama Raju
3	Damayanti	W. Colour			Sri Kasturbhai Lalbhai
4	Tippu Sultan	Pencil			K. Rama Raju
5	Sita Kalyan	W. Colour		1912	
6	Veena Seshanna	Plaster		1918	Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore
7	Ooty Lake	W. Colour	25.5x18 cm.	1926	K. Rama Raju
8	Path to Elk Hill, Ooty	W. Colour	41x25.5 cm.	1926	K. Rama Raju
9	Siva Tandava	Plaster	153x92 cm. (3 cm. thick)	1940	Govt. Museum, Bangalore
10	Portrait of a Boy	Plaster		1918	K. Rama Raju
11	Rabindranath Tagore	Plaster		1923	Govt. of Mysore
12	The Great Renunciation	Plaster Reoriented	dia 59 cm (2.3 cm. thick)	1925 1952	Govt. Museum, Bangalore
13	Radha and the Deer	W. Colour			Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore
14	After the Monsoon, Ooty	W. Colour	41x25.5 cm.	1926	K. Rama Raju
15	Cocker's Walk, Kodaikanal	W. Colour	25.5x18 cm.	1934	K. Rama Raju
16	Parting of Shakuntala	Plaster Reoriented	153.92 cm. (3 cm. thick)	1928 1948	Govt. Museum, Bangalore
17	Sunset	W. Colour	41x25.5 cm.	1957	K. Rama Raju
18	Full Moon, Ooty	W. Colour	25.5x15 cm.	1926	K. Rama Raju

Text illustration: Srutiveena of 22 Srutis constructed by K. Venkatappa

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1887 Born in Mysore City into a family of hereditary court painters, originally from Vijayanagar.

1902-1908 Studied fine arts at the Govt. Industrial School, Mysore.

1909-1916 Advanced study in fine arts at the Govt. School of Arts and Crafts, Calcutta (Principal: Percy Brown; Vice-Principal: Abanindranath Tagore).

1910 Member of Lady Herringham's team of artists for copying the frescoes at Ajanta.

1912 Initial study of Veena under Srirangam Ramaswamy Iyengar, a pupil of Veena Seshanna of Mysore.

1917-1927 Advanced study of Veena directly under Veena Seshanna

1917-1934 Ootacamund and Kodaikanal Landscapes.

1930's Ambavilas bas-reliefs. The Palace, Mysore.

1957 Sun Set. The last landscape.

1962 Elected Fellow of the Lalit Kala Akademi.

The major part of Sri Venkatappa's works are in the collections of Sri Kasturbhai Lalbhai of Ahmedabad; the Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery and at the Palace, Mysore; Sri K. Rama Raju of Bangalore; the Venkatappa Art Gallery, Govt. Museum, Bangalore and with Sri Karl J. Khandalavala, in the collections of the late Treasurywalla, Raja of Digratia and the Tagore family.

already published

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